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THE LARKIN HOUSE

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THE LARKIN HOUSE

It is probable that no private house of Californian or foreign resident of the State was more open in its hospitality to friend and stranger than was the house of the enterprising Yankee trader, Thomas Oliver Larkin.

In 1831 Larkin came to the Pacific Coast. He sailed from Boston, on the Newcastle, around Cape Horn, thence to the Sandwich Islands, and in April, 1832, reached San Francisco and arrived in Monterey on April 13, 1832.¹ He opened a small general merchandise store, and built the first flour mill in that part of the country. He hired foreigners to cut timber, make shingles and shape lumber, and took contracts for building wharves and houses. At the same time, he began to build up a trade with the Sandwich Islands and Mexico in lumber, flour, potatoes, soap, beaver and sea otter skins, and horses. His trading activities prospered so well that by the end of 1834 he was on the way to acquiring a fortune.²

During his voyage to California aboard the Newcastle,

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1. R. W. Kelsey. "The United States Consulate in California," in Publications of the Academy of Pacific Coast History, I, No. 5, 247-248.
 2. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 706.

Larkin became acquainted with Mrs. Rachel Hobson Holmes, who was on her way to the Pacific to join her husband, Captain John A. C. Holmes. When she arrived at Monterey she learned that Captain Holmes had sailed for Lima shortly before. Then three months later she received the news that her husband had died of fever on board his ship. A year later she became affianced to Mr. Larkin. However, in order to be married in California they had to accept the Catholic faith, if they expected the church to perform the ceremony. In order to avoid that difficulty they went to Santa Barbara, where on board the American vessel Volunteer, Mr. John C. Jones, United States consul at Honolulu, who was owner and supercargo of the vessel, united them in matrimony on June 10, 1833.³

Larkin then decided to build a house at Monterey for himself and his bride. The house was built of adobe and wood, in the best of what is known as the Monterey style. It was located on more or less level ground, several hundred yards south of the custom-house, at what is now the southwest corner of Main and Jefferson streets, taking up the north end of the block between Main and Pacific streets. Larkin used lumber cut by his lumbermen for its construction.

3. Kelsey, The United States consulate, 88-89.

The house was a two-story structure, with adobe walls and wooden floors, the roof covered with shingles. There was a wooden veranda around the front and two ends. This had a wooden railing on the second floor. A flower garden surrounded the house; vines climbed over the veranda. From the corners of the house a high adobe wall ran along the outer limits of the lot, enclosing the servants' quarters and inner court or patio. On the Main Street side, at the far corner of the lot, Larkin built a smaller one-story adobe building, which was used as a storehouse and for servants' quarters, and, in 1847, as Lieutenant Sherman's quarters. The house stands today, almost unchanged since that time.⁴

The Larkin house was finished in 1834, and since it was one of the best and largest homes in Monterey, it very soon became the social center of the community. When a fine ball, dinner, or other entertainment was to be given in Monterey, Larkin's house was usually selected as the place in which to hold it. As Larkin's business grew from 1834 onward, he traveled extensively throughout California and to Mexico and the Sandwich Islands. To his house came Californians and foreigners, friends and strangers alike, and all received a charming and openhanded welcome. Since there were no hotels in Monterey in the early days, visitors there had to find

4. L. B. Powers, Old Monterey, 245-247.

lodgings in the private houses of the town, so Larkin's home was usually full of guests. "His home was the scene of the most brilliant and select balls, where more than one fair señorita wore out two pairs of slippers in a single night."⁵

When noted foreign visitors arrived Larkin entertained them at his house, at lunch or dinner or some other function. Among those who paid visits to his home were Commodore Edmund B. Kennedy, U.S.N., in 1836; Sir George Simpson, of Hudson's Bay Company in 1841; Commodore Thomas Ap Catesby Jones, U.S.N., in 1842; besides many sea-captains and travelers, merchants and traders of all kinds and nationalities.⁶

On May 1, 1843, Larkin received a recess appointment as consul for the United States at the port of Monterey. This appointment was signed by President John Tyler and Secretary of State Daniel Webster. He entered formally upon the duties of his office on April 2, 1844, and thenceforth his house became the official United States consulate in California until the conquest of California by the United States brought his office to a close, on June 23, 1848.⁷

As United States consul, Larkin naturally received

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5. G. MacFarland, Monterey, cradle of California's romance, 37.
 6. Bancroft, History of California, IV, 706.
 7. Kelsey, The United States consulate, 171-176.

many calls from Americans who needed help, others who came on business, and from natives and foreigners as well. Consequently his house was always full of visitors and his entertaining bills grew apace. From April, 1844, until the end of 1845 he was busy with the regular routine duties of his office. He succored sick and destitute American seamen and cared for the local maritime interests of the United States; he aided his countrymen in securing justice from local courts; issued passports; and looked after the general rights and privileges of American citizens living and traveling in California. Naturally most of those activities centered about his house as the consulate.

On October 17, 1845, Secretary of State James Buchanan appointed Larkin as "Confidential Agent in California" for the Department of State. From early in 1846 to June 14 of that year, when the "Bear Flag" filibusters and Frémont spoiled his efforts, Larkin was engaged in trying to win the friendship of the prominent Californians and their consent to his plan of peaceful annexation of California to the United States. In these activities his house was the center for numerous conferences and for social entertainments of all kinds.⁹

8. Kelsey, The United States consulate, 173-174.

9. Ibid., 219-234.

When Frémont visited Monterey, January 27 to 29, 1846, he called on Larkin, and stayed at the latter's house during that time. It is there, that Captain Frémont supposedly received the verbal or tacit permission from General Castro to winter his party in the interior of California, which Fremont seems to have interpreted to mean that he could march them into Monterey.¹⁰

Larkin also entertained Lieutenant Archibald Gillespie, when the latter arrived in Monterey in April, 1846, with confidential despatches for Larkin and Frémont. The lieutenant stayed at the consulate until he was ready to leave in pursuit of Frémont. Several months later, on July 2, 1846 when Commodore Sloat and his squadron dropped anchor in Monterey harbor, Larkin was the first to greet the commodore and his staff. They, too, were hospitably entertained at Larkin's house, and his residence became the headquarters for all Americans in that part of the country.¹¹

Soon after Commodore Stockton took command of the American naval forces in California, he appointed the chaplain of his ship, the Reverend Walter Colton, as alcalde of Monterey. He was appointed on Tuesday, July 28, 1846, and within an hour he had packed his trunks and books and was on

10. Kelsey, The United States consulate, 212; Z. S. Eldredge, History of California, III, 8.

11. Powers, Old Monterey, 245-246.

shore, a guest in the house of Thomas O. Larkin. Thus for some days, until Alcalde Colton was able to rent a suitable house for his office, Larkin's house served as the city hall of Monterey.¹²

During the interval from September, 1846, to February, 1847, when Larkin was held captive by the Californians and was absent from Monterey, his house was closed. His wife and family were in San Francisco. Then on Tuesday, February 9, the U.S.S. Cyane arrived from San Diego with General Stephen W. Kearny and his staff aboard, and also Consul T. O. Larkin. On landing, Larkin at once placed his house at the disposal of General Kearny and the latter accepted. Larkin's house then became the headquarters for the military government of California for some weeks. Lieutenant Sherman, who was serving as adjutant-general, occupied the small adobe house at the back of the garden for some months, and all government business was transacted in Larkin's house.¹³

When General Kearny departed for the East, Colonel Mason became the military governor, and he also established his headquarters at Larkin's house until he moved his office to El Cuartel, the barracks.¹⁴ It may well be said that Larkin's house served, for a time, as the capitol for the

12. W. Colton, Three years in California, 17.

13. Ibid., 173; Powers, Old Monterey, 245-246.

14. Powers, Old Monterey, 246; MacFarland, Monterey, 60-61.

government of California.

No sooner did Larkin return to Monterey than social functions again took place at his home. On Tuesday, February 16, 1847, Walter Colton wrote in his diary:¹⁵

It is past midnight, and I have just come from the house of T. O. Larkin, Esq., where I left the youth, the beauty, the wisdom, and worth of Monterey. There are more happy hearts there than I have met with in any other assemblage since I came to California. This is the sunshine that has followed the war-cloud. This being the last night of the carnival, every one has broken his last eggshells. But few of them contained cologne or lavender; nearly all were filled with golden tinsel. Ladies and gentlemen too are covered with the sparkling shower, and the lights of the chandeliers are thrown back in millions of mimic rays. Two of the young ladies, remarkable for their sprightliness and beauty, broke their eggs on the head of our commodore, (Shubrick) and got kissed by way of retaliation. They blushed, but still enjoyed their triumph. I did not venture the lex talionés in this form, but I had eggs, and came off pretty even in the battle. The hens will now have a little peace, and be allowed to hatch their chickens. The origin of this egg-breaking custom I have not been able to learn. It seems lost in the twilight of antiquity. I must leave it to those walking mummies who love to grope among the catacombs of perished nations: should they discover it, their

15. Colton, Three years in California, 178-179.

shouts will almost shake down the Egyptian pyramids.

The egg shells used at these balls were called cascarones. To make them, a small hole was made at the pointed end of the egg, the contents of the shell were emptied for use in the kitchen and the shell was preserved until the time when the carnival or dance was to occur. The empty shells were colored by dipping them in different vegetable dyes. Gold and silver tinsel and paper of all colors were cut into small particles and put into the empty shells. The hole at the end of the shell was then sealed with wax or by a round piece of white or colored paper pasted over it. Sometimes the shells were partially filled with cologne water or perfume. The finished cascarones were then carried to the hall and there broken upon the heads of unsuspecting victims, of the opposite sex. The men usually carried their shells in their pockets, while the women took theirs in their handbags. Much time was taken at these affairs by the young men and women in maneuvering to catch their victims unaware, and as each shell cracked upon the victim's head loud cheers and laughter broke from the assembled guests. This was especially true if some wary person who had escaped for most of the evening was finally made the victim by some slyly executed coup. The shell to be broken was held in the palm of the hand and brought down,

with a swift stroke, upon the top of the head of the victim; then, with a circular motion of the hand, the particles of shell and tinsel were rubbed into the hair. After an evening at such an affair it took considerable brushing and combing to get all those particles out of one's hair.¹⁶

The cost of this kind of entertainment was quite high. Larkin systematically and carefully put it all down in his account books. A sample record of expense of one of these socials is as follows:¹⁷

Two dozen bottles of wine, \$19. One and a half dozen bottles of beer, \$13.50. Nine bottles of aguardiente (whiskey) \$13.50. Thirty pies, \$13. Cake, \$12. One box of raisins, \$4. Cheese, \$1.50. Music \$25. Nine pounds of sperm candles, \$9. Five pounds of sugar, \$3. Other eatables, \$5. Servants \$4. A total of \$122.50, for an evening's entertainment.

At the grand ball of February, 1847, among those present at Larkin's house were General Kearny, Commodore Shubrick, their staff officers; Lieutenant W. T. Sherman; Walter Colton, the alcalde; and a number of the native Californians, who had recently been fighting the Americans, and their families. This type of social function was given at intervals during the remainder of 1847 and the early spring

16. MacFarland, Monterey, 50, 60-61; Colton, Three years in California, 348-350.

17. T. L. Ford, Dawn and the dons, 216.

of 1848. Then came the news of the discovery of gold, and almost all the men in Monterey went away to the diggings for several months.

In August, 1848, came the news of the peace treaty with Mexico. That fall a new winter season of unparalleled gaieties were ushered in, which reached its climax in a grand ball at Larkin's house on the day before Lent began. Governor Mason was the guest of honor; his staff officers, Colton, and many other Americans were present. Doña Augustias de la Guerra y Jimeno had an egg breaking contest with General Mason during the evening, in which they came out with honors even.¹⁸ Mrs. Jimeno was the daughter of Captain José de la Guerra of Santa Barbara. She was given special mention by Richard Henry Dana in his book, "Two Years Before the Mast," for her beauty and grace.

During September and half of October, 1849, Larkin was a member of the State Constitutional Convention held in Colton Hall, at Monterey, and he made it a practice to invite one or more members to lunch and dinner at his house every day during the sessions of the convention. Several dances and receptions were held at his house for the delegates during that time.¹⁹

18. MacFarland, Monterey, 60-61; Colton, Three years in California, 348-349.

19. Eldredge, History of California, III, 283.

Following the constitutional convention, Larkin put his business in order, and, early in 1850, took his family on a visit to the East. They stayed there several years, and while there Larkin invested in some property in New York. In 1853, he and his family returned to California and settled in San Francisco.²⁰

By 1853 San Francisco had become the leading city on the Pacific Coast, so Larkin decided not to go back to Monterey. He thereupon entered into an agreement with Jacob P. Leese, under which Leese took over Larkin's house and other properties in Monterey, while Larkin acquired the property Leese owned in San Francisco.²¹

The Leese family occupied and owned the famous house for many years. In the early 90's it was sold to Robert F. Johnson, who later became mayor of Monterey.

Mayor Johnson had a deep feeling for the historical background and value of the old house, so he took special pains to restore it as nearly as possible to its original condition. The wall around the lot was rebuilt and the garden replanted. The Johnson family continued to own the house until recent years. In the early 1920's they decided to sell it. A message was cabled to Mrs. Harry S. Toulmin,

20. Kelsey, The United States consulate, 251.

21. Powers, Old Monterey, 246.

granddaughter of Thomas O. Larkin, who was then in England, that the house was for sale. She immediately took steps to acquire it, and thus one of the old landmarks of California's first capital reverted to a direct descendant of the man who built it.²² The house is now in possession of Mrs. Toulmin, and on rare feast days she throws the garden open to the public, with a touch of old California hospitality that made her grandfather's house so famous throughout California and the world.

22. Powers, Old Monterey, 247.

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